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by  
Eugene A. Nida





## THE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN THE CHANGING SITUATION IN LATIN AMERICA

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# The Indigenous Churches in Latin America

A discussion of the "Indigenous Churches in Latin America" is one of the most difficult and at the same time most significant topics which should be explored—difficult, because frankly so little is known about this amazing phenomenon, and significant because there are probably as many members of indigenous churches in Latin America as of all the other churches combined. In Chile the independent, Pentecostal-type churches are probably four times the size of all the other denominations put together. In Mexico they are undoubtedly equal to all the other groups, and in Puerto Rico and Cuba they are growing rapidly. In Argentina the Pentecostals, having received much of their inspiration and dynamic spirit from Chilean brethren, are growing with amazing vitality, both in the spreading urban areas and in certain rural regions. In the town of Saenz Peña, in the northern part of Argentina, a small group of Bulgarian peasants who emigrated to Argentina after the war have now grown into a church of almost 300 members and have completed the building of a Bible School, headed up by a Mexican pastor whom they have hired to develop the program. In Mexico City there is a group of some 8,000 people, who form the so-called "Portales Church", which has not only an imposing structure in the *barrio* of Portales, but some 100 small chapels in surrounding areas.

## Types of Churches in Latin America

In speaking of churches in Latin America it is important to distinguish four basic types: (1) mission directed churches, which make no pretense to being indigenous or under local leadership, (2) "national-front" churches, which are really mission directed, but which make use of local persons for figure-head leadership, (3)

"indigenized churches," in which missions have previously had control, but which are now being managed by national leaders in various countries, though often with direct financial support and indirect "leverage" on policy and programming, and (4) fully indigenous churches, in the sense that they have grown exclusively with Latin leadership and funds. In most instances these churches owe much to missionary endeavor, for they are in some cases an early break-off from formal missionary work, as is true of the Pentecostal work in Chile, which began in 1909 when a Methodist missionary left the mission and started the Pentecostal work in that land. In other instances, they may be one "spiritual generation" removed from missionary influence, as when the Pentecostal work in Argentina takes much of its inspiration from leaders in Chile or when a group of Otomi Indians in the Mesquital area of Mexico is reached through a strong Otomi leader who has had contact with a local church in Pachuca, which in turn is the result of some early missionary endeavor of a British mining engineer in the region some years ago.

In this discussion we are concerned only with this fourth type of church. This does not mean that the others are unimportant, for they are. Moreover, some of the most important problems which are developing in Latin America involve the interrelationships of churches of classes three and four—a problem which we shall consider below. We wish, however, to concentrate our attention upon this fully indigenous type of church, because there are some basic elements in these movements which are highly instructive to us as to how the total program of the church may be more effectively developed.

## Approaches to the Study of the Indigenous Churches

A study of the various indigenous churches in Latin America could be carried out along three significant lines. These are: (1) statistical, (2) historical, and (3) structural. Unfortunately, we simply do not have the statistics that we should have about such movements and in many instances there is little available histor-

ical information. Gathering statistics on such groups is almost hopeless, for there are no central organizations or control, and most groups are quite unconcerned with statistics. Moreover, most of these groups are growing dynamically and they are relatively speaking so recent that the people have not sensed the need for "history of their movements." In fact, people rarely become interested in writing history, while they are making it; and these groups, with their dynamic outward thrust, are making history so fast that they do not sense the need for tracing their own developments.

We can, however, study these movements structurally, for there are a number of distinctive features which reveal some striking relationships to the cultural background of the people. Moreover, since these structures have grown up with the people (they are the only ones the people have known), they have an indigenous legitimacy and strength which many imported structures simply do not have. It is for this reason that in so many respects these groups are outdistancing other more highly subsidized, better educated, and historically recognized groups.

## **Pentecostal Tendencies in the Indigenous Churches**

It would be entirely wrong to think of all the indigenous churches in Latin America as being "Pentecostal" in the usual sense of this word. In fact, there are great differences between some of the extreme emotional excesses of certain Chilean congregations and the more reserved fervor of a congregation such as at Portales in Mexico City. Moreover, even within a single movement there are wide differences of practice. On the other hand, certain significant features are broadly characteristic of most of these indigenous groups: (1) emphasis upon divine healing (often to the extent of regarding the use of medicines as evidence of weakness of faith), (2) the belief in speaking in tongues (though some groups insist on interpretation for any occurrence of tongues and, hence, tend to make such demonstrations more orderly and controlled), (3) the filling of the Spirit (as evidenced by healing or the gift



of tongues), (4) deep emotional fervor, often exhibited in dancing, shouting, and crying, (5) general adherence to a kind of "holiness doctrine" characteristic of certain forms of Wesleyanism, (6) importance of prayer and receiving of answers to prayer (prayer is generally engaged in by all the congregation orally and simultaneously), and (7) a type of literal biblicism which takes the Bible seriously but uncritically.

It is difficult to classify this type of movement as simply "Pentecostal". Actually, there are so many types that one must often say, "Pentecostal-like". Nevertheless, there are no more extreme types in Latin America than exist within this same general kind of movement in the United States.

## Structural Features of the Indigenous Churches of Latin America

As in the case of the range of theological beliefs and religious practices, these indigenous churches also differ widely in their basic structures and functioning. However, in this area also, there are some important structural features which tend to characterize these many formally unrelated movements.

1. *Development of a ministry through the apprenticeship system.* The leadership of the various indigenous movements in Latin America tends to be largely "laymen", who have worked their way up in the churches through an informal kind of apprenticeship system. They often begin as young men ushering in the church, then selling Scriptures or tracts. This may be followed by a period as Sunday School teachers, then as deacons or elders, and finally as assistant pastors, often in a small, newly-formed congregation, and finally when these persons are forty or fifty years of age they may become full pastors of a church. Even with full ministerial responsibilities for a large congregation they may continue to earn a living at some secular job, while giving all of their spare time to the church. In other cases they may become full-time workers for the church, but in most cases this is only after they have reached full maturity. The obvious advantage of

this type of program is that neophytes are not turned loose on congregations before they are seasoned by experience in a number of roles in church life. Moreover, by the selective process only those with real leadership ability tend to rise to the top.

This informal apprenticeship system was not worked out by any special design. It was actually the only system the people have known, for this is precisely the manner in which many local persons ultimately became Roman Catholic priests, first as choir boys, then as catechists, sacristans, and finally they were ordained. Moreover, these Pentecostal movements generally had no funds to set up Bible schools and certainly no money to pay the salaries of the graduates. But in the process they did solve two nagging problems: (1) how to support a ministry (the ministers supported themselves until they were capable of attracting a church which had sufficient members to support them) and (2) the more precarious difficulty of selecting capable persons. Rather than basing a system on the missionary's choice this program involved a kind of spiritual "survival of the fittest", which resulted in the development of leadership, rather than "followership"—the normal result of paternalistic supervision.

2. *A functional class structure.* The indigenous model used for the development of these churches in Latin America has been the local Indian or small-town social structure, which represents a number of important class distinctions, but each one based essentially on varying grades of responsibility. In a well organized Roman Catholic small town in Latin America the people are highly organized for the various responsibilities in the church. Some groups are responsible for clothing the various saints, for organizing the fiestas, for keeping the church clean, for providing food for the priests or working on the lands of the church. Heading up such a structure are the Roman Catholic priest and the elders of the town who constitute a kind of self-perpetuating leadership, for this group controls the assigning of tasks and the rising of people from one grade to another.

The indigenous churches of Latin America exhibit very similar structures, for almost everyone is given work to do. In the

Portales Church in Mexico City, for example, new converts are put under the special charge of "older brothers or sisters in the faith", who are to guide the spiritual lives of the new members. Others are given the job of evangelizing, calling on new families, inviting people to church. Many assume responsibility for one of the prayer vigils, for the church is kept open for groups praying 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Still others receive money from the church as a means of beginning their "talents," and as they buy and sell with this money, they turn in the proceeds to the church—a source of an incredible large income from such a relatively poor congregation. Many of the better educated persons may assume responsibility for a teaching ministry, for praying for the sick, for organizing churches in other areas of the city, or for making trips out into the country where persons who have visited the city church extend invitations for someone to come with the Good News to these more remote towns.

At the top of this structure is either a group of men (a kind of Sanhedrin) or a single personality who dominates the group. The strength of this structure is, however, (1) the full participation of almost everyone and (2) a gradation which depends largely upon function, rather than background. Since the people come so largely from the same general socio-economic class, there is not the same tendency for the rich or well educated to stifle the development of the more humble people as is the case in so many churches of the more historical denominations.

3. *An effective adaptation to local circumstances.* Having arisen out of the environment of which they are a part, these indigenous movements are really "indigenous". That is to say they fit, or they just would not have come into existence. This means that these movements differ radically from place to place, for the patterns of life are very different in the slum areas of Mexico from what they are in the rural Mesquital region to the north. In this latter area a group of about 2,500 Otomi Indians have worked out a very remarkable adaptation to a most difficult socio-economic problem. This area is desperately poor and violently fanatical. As a result of having accepted the gospel, the first Otomi Indians



in the area were dispossessed of their lands and driven away. They finally managed to purchase a barren, neglected hill not far from the highway, where they built modest homes and set up a type of communal Christian community. They largely shared their resources, taught each other local skills, built their houses and chapels with cooperative labor; and as the community grew undertook to hire out to the government as groups to work on roads. As their leader explained, the people believed in "redemption of the hands with work, of the mind with learning to read, of the body through divine healing, and of the soul, by which men are born again."

This group has no formal system of instruction for the teaching of people. Rather, they invite any new convert to come and live in the community for six months to a year, during which time he learns what it means to be a Christian. He participates in almost daily religious services, learns to pray by praying, learns to trust God through the joint devotion and trials of the community, and finally is sent back to his own town or to another where he becomes a member of one of the twenty or so congregations meeting in various chapels throughout the region.

In contrast with this highly organized, but "low-pressure" type of social structure, with its strong emphasis upon economic development and personal responsibility, the Pentecostal development among the Toba Indians of northern Argentina is an instructive example of quite another type of adaptation. There in the region near Saenz Peña, some Pentecostal leaders contacted a number of Indians, who after a crushing defeat by the Argentine army finally decided to do a right about face and "join the white man." Some Mennonite missionaries who had been for some time in the area were, however, quite unsuccessful in making important contacts with these Tobas, for quite naturally the Mennonite orientation was toward economic responsibility and individual resourcefulness. These semi-nomadic Tobas, however, could not understand this kind of "save and slave" way of life. They had so long been in a kind of "vulture culture," where it was either feast or famine, that they felt that a person's only security rested in the solidarity of the group, not in the resourcefulness of the

individual. In their period of disillusionment, however, a Pentecostal message had a tremendous appeal, for whereas before only certain persons could be medicine men and enjoy ecstatic experiences of fellowship with the ancestral spirits, as Pentecostals all people could be possessed by the Spirit of God and could enjoy the thrill of this new religious ecstasy. Moreover, this message of God's redeeming grace was explained as a way in which God "shared" His Son with men and His Son "shares" His Spirit. This theme of sharing struck a responsive cord, for willingness to share is a basic feature in Toba life.

Under this type of situation and preaching within a few years some 10,000 Indians of a tribe numbering some 15,000 have become Evangelicals. Of course, their understanding of the Christian message is not very deep, but their loyalty to Jesus Christ is strong. Accordingly, the Mennonite missionaries are wisely now not trying to make Mennonites of the people, but are working out ways whereby these people may be served where they are.

4. *A relevant message.* It is all too easy to make a hasty judgment of a typical sermon in these indigenous churches and to conclude that the topic and presentation is superficial and marginal to the truth of Christianity. A more careful analysis will often reveal something far more relevant than may have been thought at first. For example, on Reformation Day in the Portales church in 1959 there was no mention of Luther and in fact the Reformation as such was not even the topic of the day. Rather, as the Sunday before All Saints' Day, the theme of both the Sunday School and church service was "What is still pagan in our beliefs and customs on All Saints' Day?" Rather than studying the Reformation which occurred centuries ago, these people were vitally concerned with how they could produce a reformation in their own lives and community as they witnessed to their friends and neighbors.

The emphasis upon divine healing is sometimes regarded by outsiders as a dangerous fad, but when one realizes that in Latin America there is such a preoccupation with psychosomatic disease, especially the "evil eye" and the *susto* "fright or shock", it is no

wonder that the gospel has a relevance which seems rather unwarranted to us who look in from the outside. Moreover, even in Roman Catholicism much of the focus of attention upon the saints is related to healing, and it is not strange that this same concern should carry over into these Protestant communities.

5. *Effective means of communication.* There is no doubt about the fact that some Pentecostal-type sermons in Latin America are theologically thin, but often they are more effectively directed to the needs of the people than many sermons delivered in more traditional churches. It is true that these indigenous churches seldom engage in comprehensive Bible study. Moreover, one seldom hears a series of messages on a particular section of the Bible, for the ministers are generally not concerned with teaching the Bible, but with teaching the people. Their ministry is person-centered, but in essence they do proclaim the *kerugma*, for they consistently and repeatedly emphasize certain key points: (1) the plan and purpose of God as revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, (2) the need to repent and be baptized, and (3) the necessity of becoming a part of the church as a witnessing member.

The real communication which takes place within one of these indigenous churches is often not centered in the sermon, as important as that may seem superficially. Actually, much that is communicated comes by way of group participation in prayer, by the concentrated attention of the people to the ritual (which though informal is very highly organized), and by a kind of folk drama, for this is essentially what one finds in many of these churches. For example, in many of the churches there is a tendency for the pastors to build their sermons primarily around Biblical heroes, and on one occasion in Santiago, Chile, the pastor selected Zacchaeus, whom he described first as an embittered man who sought revenge against his own people by becoming a tax collector. Nevertheless he was a person with an empty heart and one supreme desire, namely, to see Jesus. Then he turned to the congregation and asked, "How many of you this night want to see Jesus?" Immediately, the entire congregation fell to their knees, crying unto the Lord. Within a few minutes the congregation had ceased praying, and pastor continued

with the second "act" in the drama, for he described how Zacchaeus in his desire to see Jesus ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a tree, and just at the most crucial time, he not only saw Jesus, but Jesus saw him and called him by name. Then he turned again to the people and asked how many had been called by Jesus. Again the congregation fell to their knees, but this time the psychological atmosphere of the praying was entirely different. A third time, the pastor explained to the people that if they were to enjoy the presence of the Lord in their hearts they must be willing to make retribution for their sins, even as Zacchaeus had done, and again he challenged them to take this step if they were to have the Lord within their hearts. And again the people knelt, and this time the atmosphere was still different.

This type of religious drama is strikingly similar to what existed in the early times of ancient Greece, where there was only one actor and the chorus. In this church in Santiago, the preacher was the actor and the entire congregation the chorus. The power of this type of preaching is that it provides a means of psychological identification and participation which simply cannot be equalled in the more traditional and dignified denominations.

6. *Emphasis upon worship.* While many churches in Latin America seem more like classrooms than places of worship, the indigenous churches emphasize the importance of worship as communication with God. They are not so concerned with communication about God, which is the essence of so many sermons, but with God, through prayer to Him and in listening to His voice in ecstatic devotion.

In many of the more formal churches a person might attend for years without ever learning how to pray, for prayer is so often a semi-professional accomplishment, with only certain persons taking the lead. In these indigenous churches, however, everyone prays, and the contagion is such that one can scarcely avoid praying. Certainly, the noise of others praying reduces the newcomer's timidity, for mistakes in grammar, diction, or even sentiment cannot even be heard by one's closest neighbor.



For all the "hubbub" which seems to characterize the Pentecostal-type meeting, there is nevertheless a great deal of genuine feeling of the presence of God and a sense of group participation which is the life-blood of congregational life. It is largely for this reason that one former Presbyterian explained his going to one of the Pentecostal churches in Santiago with the expression *Hace más calor aquí*. "It is warmer here."

## Dangers in the Indigenous Movements in Latin America

No appraisal of the indigenous movements in Latin America can be justly made without a realistic understanding of some of the dangers, for these do exist. For one thing there is a tendency toward *caudillismo*, which might be translated as "irresponsible leadership" or "bossism". These strong leaders sometimes demand the kind of blind devotion with which the people have been formerly familiar in the Roman Church. However, the dangers in this type of dominating personalism are not much greater than what one finds in other churches where a tradition of mission paternalism has produced severe tensions and enervating resentments, which too often result in national leaders becoming doubly paternalistic once they have control.

At the same time one must recognize that there is a tendency for many of the Pentecostal pastors to emphasize too exclusively the emotional and exhortatory aspects of their message so that as a result they fail to "feed the flock." The people are emotionally whipped Sunday after Sunday and only those who can stand such a strong emotional psychological flagellation come out spiritually alive. The others tend to fall along the way. However, it is encouraging that in some instances pastors are themselves coming to recognize more and more the need of Bible study. Moreover, the experience of the Bible societies is that these people not only buy Bibles in great quantities but make constant use of such books. In fact, some of these churches could be very appropriately known as the "churches of the dirty Bibles", for the people read their Bibles assiduously, often with dirty fingers, tracing out line after line of the text.



A third danger, and perhaps one of the greatest, is the isolation which such groups have from the rest of the Christian community. They are, of course, not easy to reach, for they are basically suspicious of any overtures from people of the more traditional churches. They sense that in many instances they come from a different socio-economic class and this only tends to strengthen their theologically founded suspicions that these other Evangelicals really look down on them. On the other hand, the experience of agents of the Bible Society, who have some of the widest possible contacts with these various groups, is that the people in the indigenous movement are often quite pathetically desirous of some recognition. They want to be accepted for what they are and not for what others would like to have them be.

There is developing some rapport between some of these indigenous groups and certain of the so-called Faith missions in Latin America, and in some cases leaders of certain Pentecostal groups in the United States have endeavored to work out a kind of fraternal relationship with certain kindred groups in Latin America. But unfortunately none of the missions within the general framework of the Committee on Cooperation in Latin America or the International Missionary Council seems to have been really seriously interested in or concerned about these groups. Actually, there is much to learn from such people and much to be gained, for in many important respects these are the people who have solved some of the most basic problems of relevant communication and effective organization of a truly indigenous Evangelical church in the Latin world. Moreover, with the increasing importance of the "mass man" in Latin America, which focuses more and more vital attention on the proletariat, these churches will increasingly be in the center of meaningful political, economic, and social revolution.

### **Basis for Effective Understanding and Cooperation with Indigenous Movements**

Before anything of lasting value can be accomplished it is essential that a thorough study of these movements be made by

someone who is fully sympathetic and at the same time can evaluate these developments in terms of their broad sociological and anthropological implications. Secondly, missionaries must be fully informed of these movements and helped to appreciate their vital significance. Thirdly, those on the spot must develop deep personal friendships with leaders in these indigenous movements. Actually, there is no substitute for these personal contacts, for no amount of institutional pressure or consultation will make a dent in the armor of suspicion. It is not by talking to these people but only by praying with them that one can attain any real measure of identification, for our institutional machinery separates us while our oneness in the Spirit can and does unite. Fourthly, one must work out joint projects, for example, Scripture distribution or joint house-to-house evangelism, which can be undertaken as a "once for all" type of project. Any tasks which are strung out over a long period of time, and which therefore seem to involve organizational relationships (and hence compromise) will almost inevitably be frowned upon, until these people gain sufficient confidence that they can see that other Evangelicals are really brethren in Christ.

The real problem of fuller fellowship is the reluctance which some persons in the more traditional movements tend to feel in associating with these people who are unconsciously classed as socially inferior, but who are outwardly rejected as being doctrinally less pure. Actually, the issue of doctrines, though it has some relevance, is not as basic as it might seem, for in some of the really fundamental doctrines of the Scriptures these indigenous churches have shown amazing insight. Certainly with respect to the doctrine of the church, they tend to live out what others only theorize about, namely, that the church is a community of the believers. The emphasis upon social solidarity, mutual help, and belonging makes of their church a congregation, rather than merely a building. In their doctrine of redemption, they likewise have an important focal element, namely, that God is love. It is not without significance that in so many of these churches the words which are placed over the altar are *Dios es Amor* "God is love." Such churches do not pay too much attention to some of the more technical aspects of redemption, e.g., substitutionary atonement, but they do empha-

size the personal relationship of God with man, and it is this redeeming fact which transforms the lives of thousands.

Perhaps one of the most important doctrines, but one which is rarely voiced overtly, is the teaching of Christian responsibility. This is conveyed largely through the system of full participation and ordered functions.

Of course, one must not give the impression that these indigenous movements "have arrived"; if they had, they would already be showing the signs of institutional decay. They are only beginning; but even though they do run the risks of becoming in some instances "cults of the Holy Spirit", they are nevertheless in the same line of tradition which won the followers of George Fox the name of "Quakers" and resulted in the Methodists being forced out of the more dignified places of worship because of their more emotional ways. We can only thank God that some persons have been able to reach certain of the economically and socially dispossessed people, who have been religiously neglected by Roman Catholicism and for the most part untouched by traditional Protestant missions and mission-formed churches. In Latin America, this "third force" is a rising factor and in some ways the real hope of the Latin world.

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